

# Aristeas the Tourist<sup>1</sup>

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1. According to James Redfield in an oft-quoted article published in 1985, Herodotus is neither a historian nor an ethnographer *avant la lettre*, but a “tourist,” that is, a “wondering stranger,” one who “goes abroad to see people different from himself,” and wonders that they are different. The “tourist,” writes James Redfield, “travels in order to be a foreigner, which is to say, he travels in order to come home. He discovers his own culture by taking it with him to places where it is out of place, discovers its specific contours by taking it to places where it does not fit. Tourism is thus both a proof and a source of cultural morale ... The tourist comes home with a new knowledge that he is at home, with a new appreciation of the only place where he is not a foreigner.” Taking his readers from Egypt to Persia, and from Persia to Scythia, Herodotus never speaks of anything but the Greeks. The point of the detour is precisely to return home; in other words, to define “home” by way of a detour.<sup>2</sup>

Greeks travel. Odysseus, we are reminded, “saw the cities of many men and learned their mind” (*Od.* I 3). In their many travels, some real, some imaginary, Greek tourists, from Odysseus to Apollonius of Tyana, describe and compare the nature, people and customs they observe, both to enhance their notion of the familiar, and to question it. “Tourism,” the experience the Greeks called *theôria*—traveling to see, traveling to know—defines the centre in contrast to the far, the foreign, the exotic, and allows us to see it anew, to question our own norms and institutions, and to suggest they too could be different, other, or that they are, as a matter of fact, exotic to others.<sup>3</sup> Thus Herodotus’s remarks concerning the madness of the Persian king Cambyses, and his mocking of Egyptian customs, following which he reports a rather noteworthy anecdote—a tale which inspired Montaigne to proclaim: “Everyone calls barbarism what is not of his usage.” Herodotus relates how another Persian king, Darius, engaged in a cultural experiment of sorts. He first asked the Greeks at his court whether they would agree to eat their dead. Then, he asked the so-called Indian Callatiae—who apparently ate their dead—if they, on the contrary, could imagine burning them (as the Greeks do). Both Greeks and Indians were properly horrified by Darius’s proposal, leading Herodotus to conclude, quoting Pindar, that indeed “*nomos* is king of all.” Indeed, in every place the custom rules.<sup>4</sup> By contrasting the Greek funerary rites to the Callatiae’s custom of eating their dead, Herodotus turned a Persian story into an interrogation of Greek rituals, and fundamentally decentred (one may say *estranged*) Greek conventions and norms.<sup>5</sup>

Going abroad is one way of decentring one’s perspective. Another way is to have the foreigner visit. Thus, for instance, Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, first published 1721. Montesquieu pretended to provide his reader with the

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<sup>2</sup> J. REDFIELD, “Herodotus the Tourist,” *Classical Philology* 80.2 (1985) 97–118, at 99.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Redfield, see also F. HARTOG, *The Mirror of Herodotus. The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1988; ID., *Memories of Odysseus. Frontier Tales From Ancient Greece*, Chicago 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Hdt. III 38. On this, see P. BORGEAUD, “Une rhétorique antique du blâme et de l’éloge. La religion des autres,” in P. BRULÉ (ed.), *La norme en matière religieuse. Actes du XIe colloque CIERGA (Rennes, Septembre 2007)*, Liège 2009: 69–89.

<sup>5</sup> On estrangement, see C. GINZBURG, “Making it Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device,” in *Wooden Eyes. Nine Reflections on Distance*, New York 1998.

original letters of two Persian aristocrats visiting Paris and exchanging their impressions of European customs. In the ingenuous eye of the foreign observer, unimpaired by familiarity, everything is surprising, even astonishing. 18<sup>th</sup> century French society, its social, cultural, and religious inconsistencies, is naively, yet severely examined by Montesquieu's alien visitors. What is the Pope, they ask, but "an idol incensed out of an old habit?" Montesquieu's Persian mask therefore shifts the responsibility for his irreverent opinions on his would-be "tourists." By describing "home" as if seen from the outside and for the first time, one demystifies the self-evidence of the norms and institutions of their own culture and society.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to Montesquieu, Herodotus doesn't mask his voice. His Greek posture is explicit. Yet he sometimes also allows the "other" to voice their perspective, thus staging an alien discourse with regard to things Greek. Take for instance the Egyptians priests, who present him with an original version of the abduction of Helen.<sup>7</sup> Interrogating these legendary sages, Herodotus learns (or rather, allows his readers to learn) that Helen had in fact never left Egypt, where Menelaus would find her after a decade of inane fighting at the walls of Troy. Hence, Herodotus seems to suggest, wasn't the whole story of Europe and Asia's confrontation, from the Trojan War down to Herodotus's time, nothing but a huge mistake?<sup>8</sup>

2. In what follows, I will turn to the so-called *Letter of Aristeas* as a prime example of ventriloquist literature in Antiquity. This Jewish-Hellenistic text, famous for its account of how the Jewish Law was originally translated into Greek in the early Ptolemaic period, is also a wonderful pseudo-ethnographic narrative, claiming to describe the Jews from the perspective of a typical Greek "tourist."

The *Letter of Aristeas* is not a letter, nor was it written by anyone called "Aristeas" (nor by any "Pseudo-Aristeas" for that matter).<sup>9</sup> It is the purported account of a Greek courtier traveling to Judea on behalf of the Egyptian King Ptolemy Philadelphus, and escorting back to Alexandria a cohort of Jewish sages entrusted with the Greek translation of the Jewish Law. If the precise dating of the text remains a controversial matter, the arguments for the Jewish identity of its author have been well rehearsed since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Although claiming to be a historical account, the *Letter of Aristeas* is a work of fiction, most probably written by an Alexandrian Jew in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.<sup>11</sup> The perspective it claims to offer, however, is that of non-Jewish court official, "Aristeas,"

<sup>6</sup> See J. STAROBINSKI, *Blessing in Disguise; or, the Morality of Evil*, Cambridge MA 1993: 60-83 ("Exile, Satire, Tyranny: Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*"). Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* were inspired in particular by Jean-Frédéric Bernard's *Letter from a Persian Philosopher*, published in his *Réflexions morales, satiriques & comiques sur les mœurs de notre siècle* (1711). See G. L. VAN ROOSBROECK, *Persian Letters Before Montesquieu*, New York 1932.

<sup>7</sup> Hdt. II 113-20.

<sup>8</sup> On Asia and Europe in the Greek imagination, see B. Lincoln, "On the Sisterhood of Asia and Europe," in F. PRESCENDI, Y. VOLOKHINE (eds.), *Dans le laboratoire de l'historien des religions. Mélanges offerts à Philippe Borgeaud*, Genève 2011: 526-40.

<sup>9</sup> I here use *Aristeas to Philocrates* (*Letter of Aristeas*), edited and translated by M. HADAS (with the Greek text edited by H. ST. J. THACKERAY), New York 1951 (reprint Eugen OR 2007). For an introduction to the *Letter*, see R. J. H. SHUTT, "Letter of Aristeas," in J. H. CHARLESWORTH (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, New York/ Garden City 1985, vol. 2: 7-11. On the author, I follow the opinion expressed, among others, by O. MURRAY, "Aristeas and Ptolemaic Kingship," *Journal of Theological Studies* 18 (1967) 337-371, at 343, and more recently S. HONIGMAN, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria. A Study in the narrative of the Letter of Aristeas*, London/New York 2003: 2, according to whom the name "Aristeas" is fictive, and need not refer to a specific historical figure. Accordingly, "Aristeas" is not a pseudonym, but a character invented by the anonymous author of the *Letter* for the purpose of his narrative.

<sup>10</sup> The arguments were laid out by H. HODY, in his *De Bibliorum textibus originalibus, versionibus graecis et latina Vulgata libri IV*, Oxford 1705: 1-89. For a summary, see H. T. ANDREWS, "The Letter Of Aristeas," in R. H. CHARLES (ed.), *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English: with Introductions and Critical and Explanatory Notes to the Several Books*, Oxford 1913, vol. 2: 83-93, at 83-4.

<sup>11</sup> E. J. BICKERMAN, "Zur Datierung des Pseudo-Aristeas," *ZNW* 29 (1930) 280-98 (=E. J. BICKERMAN, "The Dating of Pseudo-Aristeas," in *Studies in Jewish and Christian History. A New Edition in English including The God of the Maccabees*, 2 vols., Leiden/Boston 2007, vol. 1: 108-133) sought to demonstrate that the work could not have been written before 150 BCE. His arguments have often been contested, yet the only scholarly consensus seems to be that the text was written "some time" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. See J. M. G. BARCLAY, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE - 117 CE)*, Edinburgh 1996: 445; J. J. COLLINS, *Between*

writing out for the use of his brother, “Philocrates,” the record of his voyage to Judea as well as his impressions of the Jews.

I here wish to take seriously the author’s claim to provide his readers with an external testimony on the Jews, and to consider the ways in which he constructs an image of the Jews as mediated through this external perspective. Indeed, this subtle construction of a foreigner’s eye allows the author to adopt a twice-distantiated outlook, vis-à-vis both Greeks and Jews, embedding different levels of discourse in his narrative. Through an elaborate ethnographic fiction, the author can describe the Jews *as if* they were truly an alien culture, and mould them into an imaginary entity; imaginary Jews resembling Herodotus’s wise Egyptian priests and who, like the latter, can also confront their Greek interlocutor with a “Barbarian” discourse on the Greeks.

3. Let me start with Aristéas’s encounter with the Jewish high priest, Eleazar, in Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> This encounter provides our author with the opportunity to develop a lengthy speech on the Jewish Law, in fact an early example of allegorical interpretation of the biblical commandments.<sup>13</sup> The Mosaic legislation, expounds Eleazar, has been thoroughly planned in view of leading the people it addresses to their moral perfecting and to the practice of justice. The commandments contained within the Law are “signs,” or “symbols,” whose interest does not lie in their literal meaning. Each of these commandments possesses a more profound significance (*logon bathun*), accessible to men of intelligence. Consider the dietary regulations. In regard to natural or physical reason, all creatures proceed from a common origin. The legislator, however, distinguished among the animals those that are to be considered impure from those that are to be considered pure. Impure animals are, for instance, wild and carnivorous birds who use their strength to oppress other species and devour them, at the expense of all justice. The tame fowl, on the contrary, who are declared edible, distinguish themselves by eating “grains, and vegetables, all very pure things, and refrain from doing violence to their kindred.” It is according to their example that one is to lead his life, without oppressing his kindred or pride himself on his strength. In Eleazar’s words: “By such examples, then, the lawgiver has commanded to men of understanding a symbol that they must be just and achieve nothing by violence, nor, confiding in their own strength, must they oppress others.”<sup>14</sup> The dietary prescriptions, which—as underlined by Aristéas—have intrigued so many people, thus pertain to justice and to the exercise of justice in social context. No part of the Law was established randomly; and most of its commandments aim at encouraging the Jews to be righteous in all their actions, and to be mindful at all times of the omnipotence and solicitude of God.

But the Law also allows the Jews to be protected from any nefarious influence that could distract them from this ideal goal. It is a well-known fact, says Eleazar, that the company of wise and intelligent people encourages individuals to improve their way of life, whereas the company of wicked individuals is corruptive. Yet “all other men except ourselves,” points out Eleazar, “believe that there are many gods” (*pollous theous einai nomizousin*). They make powerless images of those who discoverer things useful to man, and bow in front them.<sup>15</sup>

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*Athens and Jerusalem. Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, Grand Rapids MI 2000: 98-100. On the *Letter of Aristéas* as historiographical fiction, see HONIGMAN, *op. cit.* (n. 9).

<sup>12</sup> *Ad Phil.* 128-71.

<sup>13</sup> On the dietary laws in the *Letter of Aristéas*, see K. BERTHELOT, “L’interprétation symbolique des lois alimentaires dans la *Lettre d’Aristée*: une influence pythagoricienne,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 52.2 (2001) 253-266.

<sup>14</sup> *Ad Phil.* 148.

<sup>15</sup> *Ad Phil.* 134-5.

Even worse are the Egyptians and similar “infatuated people” (*polumataioi*), who worship wild beasts, be they dead or alive, to which they offer sacrifices.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, and to preserve the Jews from such vain opinions, the legislator encircled them with “impregnable palisades and walls of iron.”<sup>17</sup> Everything among the Jews has been painstakingly codified in view of protecting them from any corrupting contact with unworthy people. The Jewish Law thus sets the Jews “apart from all men.” And while the latter defile themselves through unnatural intercourse and incestuous practices, the Jews remain free of such vices. It is only reasonable then, that the Egyptian priests themselves should consider as “godly people” (*anthrōpoi theou*) these men (the Jews) who have no interest in luxury, in drink or food, but devote their lives to the study of the true divinity.<sup>18</sup>

The high priest’s speech could easily lead us to believe that the author of the *Letter* endorses a dichotomous worldview: on one side are the Jews, who venerate the one true god in a permanent state of justice and purity, whilst on the other, the rest of mankind is ensnared by vice and violence, and drifts in the meanderings of its foolish euhemerism. This conclusion, however, fails to take into account the fact that the opinions of Eleazar, the fabricated high priest, are filtered by, and framed within, Aristeeas’s “ethnographic” account.

4. The notion that alien influence is a source of corruption causing the neglect and eventual dissolving of a people’s traditions, or *patria nomima*, is in fact a recurrent motif in ancient historiography.<sup>19</sup> According to Plutarch, Lycurgus explicitly forbade the Spartans to travel, fearing they would bring back customs foreign to their homeland and thus corrupt the political institutions he had carefully established. And foreigners, we are told, were regularly expelled from Sparta, so that they could not become “teachers of evil” (*didaskaloi kakou*) among the Spartans.<sup>20</sup> The Mosaic legislation, with its “impregnable palisades and walls of iron,” has precisely such a function in Eleazar’s discourse, that is, to protect the Jews and their institutions from any corruptive osmosis with the outside world. They are thus less the expression of Jewish separatism or “misanthropy,” than an essential element of Aristeeas’s description of the Jews as an alien wisdom able to serve as example of an ideal society.

We may also observe that the principles expressed by the Jewish high priest are echoed in Aristeeas’s description of Judea itself.<sup>21</sup> As noted by many commentators, Aristeeas’s Judea can be interpreted as an image of both biblical Palestine and Aristotle’s ideal state.<sup>22</sup> In Aristeeas’s description, Judea occupies a central position with respect to its neighbours, while Jerusalem lies at the centre of Judea, and the Jewish temple at the very centre of Jerusalem. The city itself is described as being in all possible ways harmonious—that is, neither too big nor too small—in accordance with the sensible will of its original founders. Big cities, comments Aristeeas, lead the country-dwellers to neglect the countryside and seek enjoyment. Such is notably the case of Alexandria, as the author of the *Letter* mischievously slips into Aristeeas’s observation. In Judea, on the contrary, farmers are always at work, and the countryside flourishes despite its poor soil.

In this utopian country, protected by impregnable natural defences, one naturally expects to encounter

<sup>16</sup> Ad Phil. 138.

<sup>17</sup> Ad Phil. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Ad Phil. 140.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Pl. *Lg.* 950a; DS I 96. With respect to the Jews, see Hecataeus of Abdera, in Phot. *Bibl.*, cod. 244, 380a: “...when they became subject to foreign rule, as a result of their mingling with men of other nations (both under Persian rule and under that of the Macedonians who overthrew the Persians), many of their traditional practices were disturbed” (trans. STERN [*infra*, n. 23]).

<sup>20</sup> Plu. *Lyc.* IX 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ad Phil. 105-20.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. HONIGMAN, *op. cit.* (n. 9) 23-25. Compare Arist. *Pol.* VII 11; *Ath.* 16. See also J. CA II 216. On Aristeeas’s Judea as a biblical utopia, see V. TCHERIKOVER, “The Ideology of the Letter of Aristeeas,” *Harvard Theological Review* 51 (1958) 59-85, at 77-8.

utopian inhabitants. Aristeeas's Judea in fact appears as a fantasized hierocracy, whose inhabitants abide by the laws established by their thorough lawgiver. We may thus also understand that, contrary to other people whose customs could be suspected of having degenerated after the legislator's passing (such as Sparta), the Jews, isolated by both their Law and the Judean landscape, have remained a model nation, escaping even the corruptive effects of time. Set apart from all nations, and devoting their time to the worship of the true god, the Jews are a "nation of philosophers," an image obviously reminiscent of the earliest descriptions of the Jews we encounter in Greek literature, here appropriated to serve a redescription of the Jews in Greek terms.<sup>23</sup>

5. The idealistic character of Aristeeas's account is nowhere more evident than in the banquet scene, on which our purported reporter admits to have lingered because of the great admiration he conceived toward the Jewish sages.<sup>24</sup> The seventy-two translators are described by Aristeeas as men who distinguish themselves through their merit and instruction. As trustworthy representatives of the Jerusalem high priest, they all are equally able to expound any passage of the Jewish Law with great precision. They lack all harshness and are remarkably cultured, mastering both Greek and Hebrew and being well trained in conversation. Furthermore, they are in all matters concerned with finding the happy medium.<sup>25</sup> In the banquet organised in order to welcome them, they will thus reveal their most admirable character, not only to Aristeeas but to all philosophers of the king's court.

Typical of the philosophical table talk genre, the series of questions and answers we find in the symposium scene mostly pertain to kingship and rightful governance.<sup>26</sup> Many questions bear on philosophical commonplaces, such as "What is philosophy?" "What deserves to be considered beautiful?" "How can one resist pride?" On the whole, the dialogue presents us with an unoriginal mix of Hellenistic philosophy, the keywords of which would be temperance, sobriety, self-restraint, the quest for truth, right measure, and justice, and so on and so forth. While some of the answers put forth by the translators certainly betray a more "biblical" concern, nowhere in the symposium do we hear of the Jews, of Moses, or of his legislation.

In each of their answers, the translators nonetheless manage to place—even if sometimes quite artificially—a reference to the sovereign god. Thus leading the king to tell his philosophers: "I think the virtue of these men is extraordinary and their understanding very great, for having questions of such sort addressed to them they have given proper replies on the spur of the moment, all of them making God the starting point of their reasoning."<sup>27</sup> To this, one of the court philosophers provides a properly stoic answer, invoking *pronoia*, which governs all things.<sup>28</sup> But, as the narrator subtly suggests, the king's alien guests by far surpass the court philosophers in eloquence and erudition, and moreover, by taking God as primary principle.<sup>29</sup> It is in that regard that they will eventually be

<sup>23</sup> Herodotus did not mention the Jews, although he did report that the Phoenicians and the "Syrians of Palestine" have borrowed the practice of circumcision from the Egyptians (Hdt. II 104). The earliest mention of the Jews in Greek literature appears in the works of Theophrastus (Fr. 13 PÖTSCHER), Aristotle's pupil, who describes them as a "people of philosophers" (*philosophoi to genos*). See M. L. SATLOW, "Theophrastus's Jewish Philosophers," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49.1 (2008) 1-20. On the Jews in early Hellenistic Philosophy, see J. MÉLÈZE-MODRZEJEWSKI, "L'image du Juif dans la pensée grecque vers 300 avant notre ère," in A. Kasher, U. Rappaport, G. Fuks (eds.), *Greece and Rome in Eretz Israel*, Jérusalem 1990: 3-14. In general, see M. STERN, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, Jerusalem 1976-84. On the Jews as philosophers in the *Letter of Aristeeas*, cf. M. HENGEL, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, Philadelphia/London 1974: 255-261.

<sup>24</sup> Ad Phil. 295.

<sup>25</sup> Ad Phil. 121-2.

<sup>26</sup> On the banquet scene, see MURRAY, *art. cit.* (n. 9). Cf. also G. ZUNTZ, "Aristeeas Studies I: 'The Seven Banquets,'" *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4.1 (1959) 21-36.

<sup>27</sup> Ad Phil. 200.

<sup>28</sup> Ad Phil. 201.

<sup>29</sup> Ad Phil. 235.



praised by all for their superior wisdom. Here too, the Jews appear as the representatives of an oriental wisdom invited to the philosophers' table, that is, through the prism of a Greek imagination of "alien wisdoms."<sup>30</sup> As such, they are also able to teach the Greeks a lesson in philosophy—just as the Heliopolis priests taught Herodotus a lesson in history.<sup>31</sup>

6. Aristeas's "theoretical" encounter with the Jews frames the *Letter's* broader reflection on the relation between Jews and non-Jews. In this respect, the ways in which the author of the *Letter* constructs his characters is also worth considering. In fact, the figure of Aristeas himself (which certainly avoids the pitfall of Eleazar's dichotomous worldview) both highlights and questions the border between Greeks and Jews. For Aristeas is indeed the best example that there are men among the "others" who do not fit into the picture of forsaken humanity painted in the high priest's discourse.

Generally speaking, all the characters of the *Letter* are *kaloi kai agathoi*, men of culture, education, and principles. Eleazar is explicitly praised by Aristeas as a man full of nobleness (*kalokagathia*).<sup>32</sup> Aristeas and Andreas, the two ambassadors, are in turn described by the Jewish high priest as men of great merit who stand out for their outstanding culture. Eleazar thus calls King Ptolemy a friend of the good, for surrounding himself with men of such instruction and judgement.<sup>33</sup> Aristeas himself, recounting his intervention in view of freeing the Jews enslaved by Ptolemy I during the wars of the Diadochi, is eager to stress his philanthropy, as well as his concern for justice and the good.<sup>34</sup> Philocrates, his virtual interlocutor, is presented as a man with a special interest in solemnity (*semnotés*), and characterized by his inquiring mind (*philomates diathesis*). Both Philocrates and his brother, we are told, have no interest in material wealth, but preoccupy themselves with the fulfilling of *paideia* and all that relates to it.<sup>35</sup> As a matter of fact, Aristeas is introduced in the very first lines of the *Letter* as a man of special "predilection for the careful study of religious matters (*ta theia*)."<sup>36</sup> His own curiosity, no less inquiring than his brother's, led him to do some earlier research on the Jews with the "most erudite high priests in the most erudite land of Egypt."<sup>37</sup> And it is precisely out of the same curiosity, we learn, that he volunteered to travel to Judea, and meet this man in all matters admirable, the Jewish high priest, and his people.

Aristeas is indeed a learned "tourist," attentive to the wonders and oddities, the *thaumata*, of the country he visits and its inhabitants. Yet as such, he is also an intermediary, a "bridge" that can—more subtly than the Jewish high priest—speak of the differences and the similarities between Jews and Greeks. Through this narrative figure, the author of the *Letter* thus establishes points of commensurability between the two cultures.

It is remarkable, for instance, that all the characters of the *Letter*, Jews or not, agree that there is only one sovereign god; the God who, suggests the author, granted a throne to the Egyptian king, and who watches over the kingdom's harmony. Thus Aristeas reminds the king—in a phrase which, put in his mouth by a Jewish author, is not unsurprising—that "the same god who has given [the Jews] their Law guides your kingdom, as I have learned in my investigations. God, the overseer and creator of all things whom they worship, is He whom all men worship,

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<sup>30</sup> A. MOMIGLIANO, *Alien Wisdom. The Limits of Hellenization*, Cambridge/New York 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. E. S. GRUEN, *Heritage and Hellenism. The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, Berkeley, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1998: 206-22.

<sup>32</sup> Ad Phil. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ad Phil. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ad Phil. 12-27.

<sup>35</sup> Ad Phil. 1-8; 322.

<sup>36</sup> Ad Phil. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Ad Phil. 6.

and we too, Your Majesty, though we address Him differently, as Zeus and Dis.”<sup>38</sup> Doubtlessly such wise and educated gentlemen as those envisaged by the author could only agree with Eleazar’s disapproval of anthropomorphism and of the gullibility of the Egyptian masses.<sup>39</sup>

7. The *Letter of Aristeas* is our earliest evidence to the development of the legend according to which a translation of the Jewish Law into Greek was ordered by the Egyptian king in the early days of the Ptolemaic dynasty, and entrusted to seventy or seventy-two Jewish sages invited for that purpose from Jerusalem to Alexandria.<sup>40</sup> In fact, it is chiefly in consideration of it being a “true” witness to the origins of the Greek Bible that the work has crossed the centuries and come down to us. The translation narrative, however, makes up only the bare bones of the text; and I wish to suggest that, whatever the *Letter’s* value for our historical assessment of the origins of the Septuagint, questions pertaining to the text itself, to its author, and to its cultural context, are of no lesser significance. For all its fictitiousness, the *Letter of Aristeas* (like Herodotus’ *Histories*) is a story of cultural encounter—both in the narrative itself and in the extra-textual reality that produced this narrative, that of the Hellenized Jews the *Letter* addresses; Jews who would recognize themselves in Philocrates’s (the *Letter’s* virtual interlocutor) intellectual curiosity and thirst for knowledge; Jews who would readily learn from an outside observer such as “Aristeas,” that the Jewish way of life, including those customs which arouse curiosity, even scorn, are not irreconcilable with the principles of Greek *paideia*, and may on the contrary event be considered its highest expression. Undoubtedly, the *Letter of Aristeas* is a reflection on Jewish identity in a Hellenized world.

Scholars have underlined how this original “Greek book” exemplifies the acculturation of the Jews in the Hellenistic age. The work indeed reveals an author well steeped in Hellenic culture, with a distinctive mastery of the Greek language and of Greek literary canons. Some scholars have nevertheless suggested that this Hellenistic *baggage* is here being subverted in order to serve the purposes of the author’s panegyric of the Jews and of the Jewish Law. That is, that the author’s unambiguous Jewish identity, or rather, his sense of that identity, was in fact not dissolved but enhanced by his involvement with the “dominant” Greek culture. In fact, while advertising the points of cultural convergence between Jews and Greeks, the *Letter* also points at their limits. Thus, according to John Barclay, the text “demonstrates both the extent of [the author’s] acculturation and the limits of his assimilation.” The author of the *Letter*, writes Barclay, “never abandons the Jewish sense of difference,” and in fact “use[s] Hellenistic categories to define the terms of Jewish superiority.”<sup>41</sup> In a sense this is true. Yet the *Letter’s* Jews are as fictive as their Greek interlocutor; they are a distorted image, an exaggeration, playing on both a Greek

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<sup>38</sup> Ad Phil. 16.

<sup>39</sup> On the criticism of divine images among Greek philosophers, see C. CLERC, *Les théories relatives au culte des images chez les auteurs grecs du II<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C.*, Paris 1915: 89-123; P. BORGEAUD, *Aux origines de l’histoire des religions*, Paris 2004: 25-41. Regarding ancient perspectives on Egyptian religion, see K. A. D. SMELIK, E. A. HEMELRIJK, “‘Who knows not what monsters demented Egypt worships?’ Opinions on Egyptian animal worship in Antiquity as part of the ancient conception of Egypt,” *ANRW II* 17.4 (1984) 1852-2000. See also G. BOHAK, “The Ibis and the Jewish Question: Ancient ‘Anti-Semitism’ in Historical Context,” in M. MOR, A. OPPENHEIMER, J. PASTOR, D. R. SCHWARTZ (eds.), *Jews and Gentiles in the Holy Land in the Days of the Second Temple, the Mishna and the Talmud*, Jerusalem 2003: 27-43; M. A. L. Beavis, “Anti-Egyptian Polemic in the Letter of Aristeas 130-165 (the High Priest’s Discourse),” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 18.2 (1987) 145-151; K. BERTHELOT, “The Use of Greek and Roman Stereotypes about the Egyptians by Hellenistic Jewish Apologists, with Special Reference to Josephus’ Against Apion,” in J. U. KALMS (ed.), *Internationales Josephus-Kolloquium Aarhus 1999, Münster 2000*: 185-221.

<sup>40</sup> On the legend, see G. DORIVAL, “La traduction de la Torah en grec,” in C. DOGNIEZ, M. HARL (eds.), *Le Pentateuque. La Bible d’Alexandrie*, Paris 2001: 31-41. On the translation narrative in the *Letter of Aristeas*, see G. ZUNTZ, “Aristeas Studies II: Aristeas on the Translation of the Torah,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4.2 (1959) 109-126. For a detailed study of the *Letter* and its relation to the historical translation of the Bible in Greek, see HONIGMAN, *op. cit.* (n. 9).

<sup>41</sup> BARCLAY, *op. cit.* (n. 11) 147-49.

representation of Judaism as an oriental wisdom, and a Jewish sense of singularity, all the more emphasized by the author's self-conscious effort at "exotization."

Cultural encounters both reify and renew cultural identities. By way of comparison, one may consider the case of the British in the context of colonial India; as historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam observes: "The British, once they had conquered India, did not remain—even a single generation afterwards—the British who had conquered it."<sup>42</sup> Cultural interactions necessarily produce original cultural identities, which, while claiming to stay the same, are fundamentally transformed. Hellenistic Judaism is one such "hybrid reality," in which the Jews, to quote Erich Gruen, have not only "digested Hellenic culture," but also "surmounted it."<sup>43</sup> What it meant to be a Jew, however, was inevitably transformed in the process.

The real Jews behind the *Letter*, the community at Alexandria, certainly delighted in hearing such a wondrous tale in which the Jews appear as the true paragons of philosophy, and the Jewish Law in Greek is deemed praiseworthy by Greek philosophers and by the Greek king himself. Speaking from the viewpoint of his purported Greek ethnographer, the author of the *Letter* can point to both the similarities and differences that allow Jews and Greeks to be two distinct cultural identities in a unique cultural environment. Through the voice of his fictive high priest, mediated by his no less fictive Greek tourist, the author of the *Letter* thus underlined that, by sticking to the Jewish Law and its many rules (and neglecting none of them) the Jews appear not as the tenants of parochial customs, but as a living people of philosophers, exercised in the constant practice of virtue, piety and justice—that is, in the philosophical way of life—and should as such be rightfully praised by the Ptolemaic king, Egyptian priests, and Greek philosophers and tourists alike.

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<sup>42</sup> S. SUBRAHMANYAM, "Beyond Incommensurability: Understanding Inter-Imperial Dynamics," *Theory and Research in Comparative Social Analysis* (UCLA), paper 32 (2005), accessible online: [<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9vs8x4sk>], quotation p. 24.

<sup>43</sup> E. S. GRUEN, *Heritage and Hellenism. The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, Berkeley, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1998: 221.